

of the foreign-policy review, this probably matters very little – though it is possible to argue even here that the Cabinet was convinced that it was making important decisions even when it was not. But when the result is apocalyptic social engineering of the sort initiated by the Club of Rome, or when the “conceptualizations” are converted for political purposes into over-simple slogans like the “New International Economic Order,” or “Spaceship Earth,” or the “Global Village,” the effects may be much graver. Obviously such flourishes can have a constructive long-term effect in “sensitizing” attentive publics to important issues, and by altering the climate within which problems are subjected to debate. But to the extent that they also serve as substitutes for a genuine understanding of cause-and-effect relations, they serve to disguise the consequences of substantive (as opposed to declaratory) public policies, and hence inhibit the development of precisely the kind of knowledge required for the effective working of “responsible government” processes.

No substance

The point of all this is not that the Prime Minister is necessarily at fault for engaging in “consciousness-raising” but otherwise vacuous exercises in public education. The point is rather that, on many of these global questions, neither he nor his colleagues have much of substance to offer. They have, in other words, no directives to give. This is doubtless the result in part of the traditional pluralism of their domestic constituency – pluralism that inhibits any political leadership intent upon staying in office from taking excessive policy risks. But in a profound way it seems to derive as well from the fact that, even if they were completely free of electoral constraints, they still would not know what to suggest. Short of a wholesale revision of the basic assumptions upon which modern industrial and technological societies are based, the problems are simply too large and too complex to permit them to develop clearly-defined policy responses. They continue, therefore, to await the output of a complex machine over which they exercise only nominal control, while pursuing in public an increasingly empty and charade-like ritual. In the meantime, the machine itself is found to be largely incapacitated by the scope and intricacy of many of the problems it confronts – not in the sense of being unable to act at all (for it does produce “actions”) but in the sense of being unable to act with coherence or with an understanding of the implications of its behaviour.

*Inhibitions
against taking
policy risks*

These problems of political leadership are compounded at the level of Parliament, whose job it is to keep the Cabinet under a close and critical scrutiny. The individual Member, generally unsupported by a research staff or other significant sources of independent expertise, cannot begin to grapple with the complexities of the issues. Even if he scores a point, it will frequently be against a minister who did not himself commit the sin of making decisions for which he is being held accountable. In some degree, of course, this has always been the case, and the fiction that ministers control in detail what their departments do from day to day is a traditional feature of the conventions upon which the the parliamentary system has been based. Presumably, however, there can come a time when the fiction is so much at odds with reality that it can no longer be sustained except by the pursuit of unacceptably empty rituals.

The character of the current international (and domestic) agenda suggests that this situation is now well on the way to being reached. Under such circumstances, the difficulty with Parliament is not, as is often alleged, that its members are stupid, parochial, corrupt and obstructionist – though this can sometimes be part of the problem. The difficulty is that Parliament is grossly overtasked and, as a result, its performance does not measure up. Accordingly, public servants come to refer to it with contempt, journalists desert it in droves, and its own members grow increasingly despondent with each new demonstration of their own impotence.

Advancing farther down the chain of accountability, to the level of the citizen, it is clear that the problem is here compounded yet again. How could it be otherwise – given the elaborate intricacy of the issues, the evidence of public ignorance of such matters, for example, as the size of CIDA's budget, the character of the questions so hotly contested at the CIEC meetings in Paris, or the implications for Canada of a failure to moderate the exploitation of manganese nodules on the ocean floor (to say nothing of the secondary and tertiary effects of these developments in other areas)? This further compounding of the problem reflects the inescapable limitations of human capacity.

The argument, in sum, is that the development of each new interaction between Canadian and global interests, the growth of each new complexity in the agenda of national and international politics, and the appearance of each new pluralism in the processes by which public